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January 17, 2007

Senator advises combining N.D. schools for blind, deaf

Merging the state's schools for the blind and the deaf is something North Dakota "will do and has to do," a state senator said Monday.

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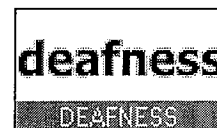
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Sen. John Andrist, R-Crosby, is the prime sponsor of a bill proposing to consolidate the North Dakota Vision Services School for the Blind in Grand Forks with the North Dakota School for the Deaf in Devils Lake.



Enrollment at the School for the Deaf has dwindled from 130 resident students to 26 in the past 25 years, Andrist said.

The proposed school budget is \$6.8 million, with a per-pupil cost of \$119,000. The budget for housing is \$837,000, or almost \$30,000 per student, Andrist said.

Senate Bill 2173 asks the superintendent of public instruction to develop a plan to merge the schools in Devils Lake. The plan would be presented during the 2009 Legislature, with a tentative consolidation timeframe of three years, Andrist told the Senate Education Committee. An appropriation of \$50,000 is requested to develop the plan.

Devils Lake is proposed as the site because the School for the Deaf is in the state constitution and it's larger. Loss of the school would also seriously affect the local economy, Andrist said.

Sen. JoNell Bakke, D-Grand Forks, asked if anyone at the schools was asked what impact the move would have on staffing and services.

Bill co-sponsor Sen. Aaron Krauter, D-Regent, said the study would do that. He emphasized that the goal isn't to stop services, but to provide better services more efficiently.

Rep. Ole Aarsvold, D-Blanchard, said it's wise to look at making government more efficient. But he's concerned about the predisposition to merging in Devils Lake without considering Grand Forks.

Allan Peterson, of Fargo, a legislative liaison for the North Dakota Association of the Blind, opposes the move.

One of the reasons for moving the School for the Blind to Grand Forks years ago was to provide access to public transportation for those who can't drive, he said. Moving to Devils Lake would mean a significant downgrade in that service, he said.

The vision education program at the University of North Dakota also has a close working relationship with the School for the Blind, Peterson said.

Beth Bakke Stenehjelm of the North Dakota School for the Blind Foundation worries the school's eight vision professionals won't make the move to Devils Lake and services to clients would suffer. Finding employees in that field is difficult, she said.

North Dakota School for the Deaf Superintendent Dennis Fogelson did not return a call Monday seeking comment.

Bakke said the bill will be discussed more today.

<http://www.in-forum.com/News/articles/153110>

Posted by 4HL on January 17, 2007 8:37 AM

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